

On: The Arctic Monkeys

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by Dana Stewart

The Arctic Monkeys released "Whatever You Think I Am That's What I Am Not" on January 23rd of this year, and it has since sold more copies than any British album in its first week of release. Ever. Over 360,000 people bought the CD in one week. And in the UK alone; an American release is still a few months out.

So it's yet another four-man-rock-band, heaped with hyperbolic praise and phrases like "rallying cry of a generation" or "superstars of the iPod age" (whatever that means) by critics throughout the English-speaking world. The UK's main music mag, NME, has put it on a recent list as the 5th greatest album ever; comparisons to Oasis and the Strokes, even the Beatles, abound.

But the record came out only one week ago, and this record-breaking success has happened without the band really trying, at all. That is quite important, it would seem, when searching for any validity in hype.

So here's the story, with brevity in mind:

Band of 4 young S.W.M.'s from a town in England most Americans have never heard of: Sheffield. It's in South Yorkshire, about 150 miles north of London. (South Yorkshire is a region, or a municipality, like Ohio.) These men are quite young, not one of them could buy a drink in America. They've been playing guitars since they received them in 2002 for Christmas. (We must assume Santa Claus brought one of them a drumset.) They start a band, practice in a warehouse and play some shows where they hand out free CDs. Fans accrue. The free CDs become freely traded MP3s. Showgoers start singing the words along with the band. The rest follows a fairly predictable trajectory, but the story has clearly a ways to go, given that the meat of this entire drama has happened in the space of about eight months.

But what is to be learned? There's got to be something here that's more than a fad, something a bit more meaningful than music-mob-mentality. It is definitely a situation where time will be the only honest critic, but the exuberance and pure flammability of this album is worth considering.

The music is quick rock, based on a careful listening of no more than the last five years of popular music. Certainly, the Arctic Monkeys are an obvious result of a style articulated by New York's The Strokes, The Hives from Sweden, or Canada's Hot Hot Heat. So their message, if you want to call it that, cannot be singularly English. But the lead singer's thick accent (Americans may be thrown off by lyrics like "summat" and "queue") speaks to his identity as part of a very specific scene. Similar to a earlier British phenom, rapper Mike Skinner (aka The Streets), the regionalistic nature of the music helps it, through and through. Both the Arctic Monkeys and the Streets before them describe wholly imaginable youthful experiences, easily placing us in the club or street

or basement setting of the song.

Presently, it would seem near impossible to judge the songs on "Whatever You Think I Am..." for the all-important timeless quality. They do not sound infinitely applicable upon very first listen, like, for instance, the songs on *Abbey Road*. But their explosive popularity speaks to something, probably something in the modern youthful consciousness. When Oasis was all anyone in England could talk about, it was hard to tell what they stood for, just as when the same thing happened in America with the Strokes. In hindsight (not to slight the Strokes' newest album, which is both different and good), the Strokes seemed to encapsulate a early 2000's New York hipster aesthetic, which was catchy if kind of boring. Their most important contribution to the general music consciousness, as of yet, is their recalling attention back to the style of the Velvet Underground, which was all about innovation.

Modern rock needs innovation like a blood transfusion. The political holding-pattern of inefficacy and unoriginality exhibited in American government is mirrored in much of our music, which is derivative and nauseatingly corporate. In that light, the Arctic Monkeys are a step forward and a good Anglo example. They've carved out a huge space for themselves; or rather the fans of their irrefutably likable music have done it for them. They should be allowed to grow in a nurturing, flexible environment, like a Montessori preschool. But the world at large is not like that, not least the record business world.

(this is not the end...)